

November 4

I awoke early to vote for change. It was an unseasonably gorgeous fall day, bright sunlight glinting of the color-changing trees and making everything look golden, the air warm and comfortable. I walked to my polling place, just blocks away, in the basement of city hall. The line stretched out the door and around the building. It was clear this was no ordinary election. "I've never seen anything like this," one old-timer commented. "I've never voted here before," another explained.

An elderly man brought a chair to sit on while he waited, I chatted with friends I spotted behind me in line — it seemed as if the whole neighborhood was here. Nobody minded. Spirits were bright and the pollworkers seemed almost giddy at getting to oversee the process. Few of the elections were contested and the winner of the Massachusetts' electoral votes was a foregone conclusion, but everyone felt a need to be there.

I grabbed some breakfast and dispatched some errands and then grabbed my companion for the trip to nearby New Hampshire. The night before I had persuaded her to drive me up and volunteer. A swing state, just an hour away, I pointed out. Won't it be fun to join in one of the biggest and most impressive volunteer operations in history? Convinced, we set the GPS for Manchester City Center and drove off toward history.

Manchester is not a big city. Elm, its main drag, is crammed with office buildings and city hall and sports stadiums side-by-side as if no one would find them if they were spread farther apart. If it gives off any impression, it's one of New England homeiness: brownstone buildings, divey diners with pizza and subs. Wandering the streets, I couldn't help but think of Jed Bartlett bundled against the cold, buttonholing a senior staffer. I literally bounced with excitement. The streets were filled with optimism and it seemed like every street bum and cashier and radio was talking about the election.

The Obama office was on Elm Street, just further down, as the buildings thinned out and begun to look somewhat abandoned. Next door were what looked like abandoned carpet showrooms turned into headquarters for local political campaigns, a huge billboard proclaiming "SUNUNU" loomed in the distance. Behind it was a packed parking lot in front of an elegant cemetery. We parked the car and headed back around to the front door, passing laughing kids carrying doorhangers, rows of portapotties, a mountain of discarded pizza boxes, and a few big bags of plastic bottles and packaged lunches.

Shy at the best of times, I couldn't summon the courage and walk through the door and lay myself on the line — so I pushed my companion to do it first. The notion filled her with dread and, clutching her stomach, she ran back around to the portapotties to vomit. "You can't just expect me to march into a campaign office with no warning like that," she complained. "You need to sign up, get an assignment, pick a shift." I disagreed, pointing to a couple emails I'd gotten on my phone urging me to head down to the closest Obama office as quickly as possible. She was not persuaded. At a stalemate, we decided to go grab some pizza and summon our courage.

Newly fortified, I bravely marched into the office. Stairs led up to a receiving platform. One door was labeled phonebanking, another canvassing, and an office seemed to lie behind the front desk. At the top of the stairs peering out over the railing stood a broad-shouldered guy in a green shirt. "You here to volunteer?" he asked us as we walked in. "How can we help?" I asked. "Perfect!" he said. "Come on up here."

Once we were within his sights, he began his spiel, full of energy. "We're making history today! This is the most important election of our lifetime and we need you to help. And the way you're going to make history" — he grabbed a manila folder off the counter — "is by going to going to Sandown." "No," said the girl sitting behind the front desk. "Bedford." He placed the file back and grabbed a new one from the girl. "Forget Sandown, you're not going to make history in Sandown. You're going to make history in Bedford."

A couple young girls walked in, also wanting to volunteer, and he quickly pulled them into our group. "You're going to make history today in Bedford. We need to get every single person out to the polls." He opened the file and pulled out a map. "Now what you're going to do is head over to our Bedford staging area and they're going to give you your assignment." He handed out directions and made sure everyone understood. "Now it's not going to be a big building like this — it's going to be a house we're borrowing with a ton of cars parked outside." We all nodded.

"Sounds good? Are you fired up? Ready to go? Let's make history! Remember — we're counting on you. Oh, one more thing—" he turned to one of the girls. "Did you vote for change today?" She nodded. He handed her a "I voted for change" Obama sticker. "Did you vote for change today?" "Yep." Sticker. "Did you vote for change today?" "I voted for change weeks ago," my companion explained. He grinned and handed her a sticker. And I got one too. "Now let's make history!" And with this enthusiastic sendoff, we headed back to our cars to drive to Bedford.

Bedford is a sleepy little suburban town with houses three times the size of San Francisco mansions and lawns bigger than the houses. As promised, the Bedford staging center was one of them, with cars filling the enormous driveway and stretching out onto the street. As we walked the path up to the front door, little signs had been posted in the grass, together spelling out a quote from Barack Obama about the importance of activism and change, a couple sentences at a time.

Inside was the typical suburban home, except filled with campaign workers milling around. It reminded me a bit of what it looks like when someone's house is borrowed for filming. "Water and granola to the left, canvas packets to the right," someone explained. We headed right, into the living room, where a man behind a table was lecturing to a group of maybe twenty or thirty people. He was just finishing up as we arrived.

"Well, I've talked for long enough. But here's the basic idea. You go thru the packet, you find people who weren't home or hadn't voted yet, you knock on their doors and you mark the result down. Got it?" People nodded, grabbed their clipboards, and headed out. We went up and grabbed a clipboard of our own. "What do you say?" we asked. "You say: 'Hi, I'm here for change. We need change this election. And Barack Obama and Jeanne Shaheen are the change we need.'" (We support Lynch too but he doesn't need our help.) This isn't like normal canvassing. If you spend more than a minute at a house you're doing it wrong. And you need to take your car—houses here are so far apart that it can take three minutes to walk from one to another." We grabbed some doorhangers and headed off, leaving our name and number on a sheet indicating who was working which turf. Kids were wandering around the apartment chatting as we left. We certainly weren't the only ones who had driven up from Boston. Outside, the signs in this direction read "Fired up? Ready to go!"

Canvassing in the suburbs seems about the last thing any kid would want to spend your day doing. Here's how it works: You're given a clipboard with a list of people. Each one has a name, age, gender, address, and sometimes a phone number. They're sorted by address. You find their house, park outside, walk down their (loooong) driveway, and knock on the door. Usually, they're not home and you check "not home" on the clipboard and stick a doorhanger (which says "VOTE OBAMA TODAY", gives polling place information, and explains that college students and unregistered people can still vote) on the door. You could tell the folks who were out-of-town because they had a whole collection of doorhangers, each one more urgent than the next — "VOTE OBAMA NOV. 4", "VOTE OBAMA TUESDAY", "VOTE OBAMA TODAY!"

That's probably the best case. If they're home, you awkwardly try to explain why you're out here in the middle of nowhere knocking on their door, and ask them to go vote. It was late in the day and our walk packet had already been walked once before, so everyone we met had already voted, for Obama naturally. (The exception was one couple who we encountered walking to their car. They were heading out to vote, they assured us.)

The first few times I was too nervous to say anything and let my companion do all the talking, but after a few times of seeing what peoples' reaction were like (positive, friendly, and filled with assurances they'd already voted for Obama) I begun speaking up and then splitting the workload.

Out in the suburbs, you spend most of the time hunting for the right house numbers (our walk list was careful to only include known supporters, which meant most houses were skipped) and walking back to your car. You get to see people, but not a particularly wide variety and not for very long. A handful were very friendly and expressed their appreciation that we were volunteering. One asked us to leave extra doorhangers for her husband to see. (Naturally, her husband was not on our list of Obama supporters.) It was wildly unrewarding work and it quickly got late, forcing us to walk alongside streets without sidewalks in the dark. (We hadn't thought to bring flashlights.) Toward the end, I ran into the one woman who was mean to us. Refusing the open the door she shouted thru the window at me, angry I'd interrupted her cooking dinner. (Of course she'd already voted.) Tired and frustrated, we headed back to the staging center, only 3/4 of the way through the packet.

Back at the staging center, college girls were chatting with the house's owner, a well-coiffed woman with gold earrings and a pink sweater. Was the kid running things here their son, they asked? "Kerry? Oh no, he's just a volunteer who's been living here for the campaign." Kerry, for his part, was packing up and heading for Manchester. Like a professional entertainer, his enthusiastic demeanor had been packed up too. He was upset to hear we hadn't made it through the whole walklist, but cheered up when he learned it was one that had already been walked. "Find any nonvoters?" he asked. "No," I said, "except for one couple we caught on their way to vote." "Yeah, people here, they need a nudge maybe, but they're going to vote. Not like people in Manchester. There you gotta pick 'em up, walk 'em to the polls, stand next to them in line, and then stand behind them as they swear the affidavits." (New voters without ID or proof of address can vote by swearing an affidavit, as the doorhanger explained.) He didn't sound enthusiastic, just grimly determined.

"You know, New Hampshire was once won by just a couple hundred votes?" "Wow," I said, putting on my best isn't-volunteering-important? tone. "Of course, that was like a hundred years ago, but still." And with that, Kerry rushed out, telling one volunteer to email him and wishing him luck with college.

The college girls were still chatting. "Wow, this is some good pizza," they said. "Hah," said the house's owner, "people think you can only get good pizza in Boston, but Bedford proves otherwise." "We're going to head back to Boston — we've all got election parties."

There wasn't much left to do here and with just 45 minutes until the polls closed, chasing downtown voters to the polls didn't sound like much fun, so we decided to head back to Boston as well. Things were pretty clear by the time we got there, but we dutifully watched the TV and Web as the networks inched closer to calling it. When they finally did, we could hear honks and cheers go up from outside our window.

McCain quickly conceded — even before the polls in Alaska had closed — and Obama's acceptance speech followed shortly thereafter. It was a calm, studied affair. There were no big surprises — everything turned out basically as had been predicted for the past month. "At this point, FiveThirtyEight is just spoilers," my companion observed. I didn't feel much enthusiasm, just relief. It had happened. It had really truly happened. We sat quietly and let it sink in.

Apparently we were in the minority when it came to quiet acceptance. Outside, we could hear drums banging and horns honking and people screaming by. Harvard Square begun filling up with cheering people, as far as the eye could see. I've never seen it so packed — folks said it was even bigger than when the Red Sox won the World Series. Even the police seem jubilant. "Were you expecting this?" someone asked them. "We should have..."

The procession marched down Mass Ave, the city's main street, picking up people on the sidewalk as it went. Flags were hoisted, signs were waved, people chanted "Yes We Did!" and "Time For Peace!" ("What do we want?" "Change!" "When do we want it?" "Now!") "Change begins tomorrow" became "Change starts now".

The police became increasingly aggravated at the march without a permit and cop cars began flashing their sirens and trying to force people onto the sidewalk while shouting at us with their megaphones. Folks were pissed at them — there was some talk about fighting back or smashing the Gap we passed — but cooler heads prevailed and folks just kept marching.

Finally, we headed into the new parkish thing outside Toscanini's and someone jumped on top of a table to give a speech. "Don't stand on that, please," one of the cops asked, "it was named for one of my guys." He stood on top of a concrete embankment instead. I recognized a few faces in the crowd and it became clear I wasn't the only one who was back from New Hampshire.

"We did this!" the guy on the concrete shouted. "Through our voting and our volunteering, we changed this country. Making change won't be easy, but tonight we celebrate that we've changed who's in the White House." The cops snickered. Another kid jumped on top of the concrete. "And pot is legal!" he screamed. "Decriminalized!" shouted the cops. (A state ballot proposition reducing the penalty for possession of reasonable quantities of marijuana to a \$100 fine had passed.)

Soon things folded up and folks shuffled back to Harvard Square, peeling off to their apartments as they went. I got back and watched CNN's video of similar street gatherings in cities across the country, saw Flickr photos of similarly packed town centers. A lot of work lay ahead, but for that night we could relax and say simply: we won.

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